

# ANCIENT IRAN

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Francesca Dorna Metzger

## FUNERARY BUILDINGS AT HATRA

### Introduction

The tombs of Hatra are stone monumental constructions built on the ground and clearly identifiable on it. The main source for the study of these buildings is the work of prof. Andrae who in the first years of this century recognized and put on the topographical plan of the city 72 funerary buildings, often with descriptions, schematic reliefs and sections of the exposed remains without any archaeological investigation (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Research continued in 1970 with the excavation and the publication of eight tombs of the J necropolis, by an Iraqi archaeological expedition under the direction of dr. Watiq al Salihi.<sup>2</sup> Another three funerary buildings, two of which are along the fortifications (IX and II) and one outside the city and opposite to the eastern gate (O), were excavated, but not fully published.<sup>3</sup> The progress of the archaeological researches in Hatra furnishes new data on the funerary monuments, especially for their relationship to urban development.

### Topographical location

This older ground investigation assisted by aerial photography has provided new data (Phot. 1) to complete the plan of Andrae,<sup>4</sup> increasing substantially the number of funerary buildings to around 142.<sup>5</sup> In the final phase of the city almost all of the tombs are inside the urban inhabited area. The initial burial were disposed in the necropolis, later in smaller groups of two or three tombs, isolated inside of the city, or inserted in the main city wall. Two constructions only are between the principal fortification and the exterior one.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrae 1912: 75–106; of the 72 tombs set on the general plan of the city 58 have a description, 21 have a relief and section, and 18 only a relief. Andrae's publication also furnishes a preliminary typology of the tombs.

<sup>2</sup> al Salihi 1972: 17–20, fig. A–C, 1–23.

<sup>3</sup> Killik/Roaf 1983: 211–13, and al Salihi 1991: 188–91.

<sup>4</sup> From the aerial photography of Hatra it is possible to note Andrae's plan of the site (Andrae 1912: tab. 1) is incomplete in the southern and western part of the city.

<sup>5</sup> Some tomb buildings entirely in stone, of square or rectangular form, isolated from other buildings, are sometimes grouped on the open areas of the city. A few of these funerary buildings have been excavated.



The majority of the funerary buildings are situated inside the main wall. The areas of the city with a deeper concentration of tombs are the E and SW, while there are less funerary buildings in the northern part of the city. Generally the tombs are built in peripheral areas, often near the fortifications, and never occur near the *temenos*, in the central zone of the inhabited area. This is probably due to the presence of an earlier fortification between the *temenos* and the main city wall, which excludes the funerary constructions from the older dwelling area.<sup>6</sup> Most of the funerary buildings of Hatra are grouped in the necropolis.

The necropolis of Hatra are areas with many closely built tombs, reachable by one or more roads, sometimes surrounded by continuous building walls which isolate the area from the inhabited areas. Inside the necropolis, tombs are arranged on parallel lines and with a common orientation. This element distinguishes the Hatra necropolis from the necropolis of other sites with monumental buildings standing on the ground, like Assur, Dura Europos, and Palmyra, where the tombs are arranged chaotic ally, following the ground morphology.<sup>7</sup> Besides the real necropolis there are in Hatra small groups of two or three tombs disposed along roads or in city squares. The general orientation of tomb alignements, either, in small groups or in the necropolis, follows a common order throughout the city: NS to the E and W, EW to the S and N. A smaller number of tombs are isolated in the city, in prevalence to the E and S. Some funerary buildings have been included in the main fortification, E and NW side of the city wall.

The tombs, built entirely in stone, with rooms inside (Phot. 2) are constructed different from the original towers of the fortifications, composed like the wall itself in mudbrick on a base of large cut stones, or from the massive stone towers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore the relationship between the three different types of towers and the fortification wall is different. The original towers built in mud bricks on a stone base are contemporary to the fortification, the tombs are older than the wall and are included into the fortifications, while the stone massive towers are a later addition to the fortifications. Moreover the tombs appear differently from the outside: features in some cases they have an architectural decoration, and the original windows are later blocked by stones, without arrowslits like the towers. The tombs which are included in the fortifications are isolated tombs: (Fig. 2) and do not belong to the necropolis. Opposite to the N and the E city gates (Fig. 1) there are two buildings which appear to have served a defensive purpose, as Andrae pointed out. In fact, at least for the east one (O), the funerary function is certain according to excavation data.

## Building technique and typology of the funerary buildings

Hatra funerary buildings have a squarish shape,<sup>9</sup> between 6 and 11.10 meter for each side. They are composed from an entrance floor, sometimes partially underground, and a possible

<sup>6</sup> Gawlikowski 1994: 163.

<sup>7</sup> The necropolis of Assur is without an organized plan (Andrae/Lenzen 1933: 99, tab. 2) with four buildings set without order in a zone far from the mostly inhabited area of the Parthian period. At Dura (Toll 1946: tab. 1) the tombs built on the ground are few, and are mere sheds in the big necropolis of catacombs. At Palmyra (Gawlikowski 1970: Fig. III-IX) the tower tombs are outside the original city, along roads, and they follow the course of the ground more than space order.

<sup>8</sup> This distinction of the different types of towers was already noticed by Andrae (1912: tab. 1, where massive towers and other structures are diversified in the numeration and many tombs are indicated with rooms inside).

<sup>9</sup> The only exception is represented by building L1, in the northern part of the city, that has an absed exterior northern wall.



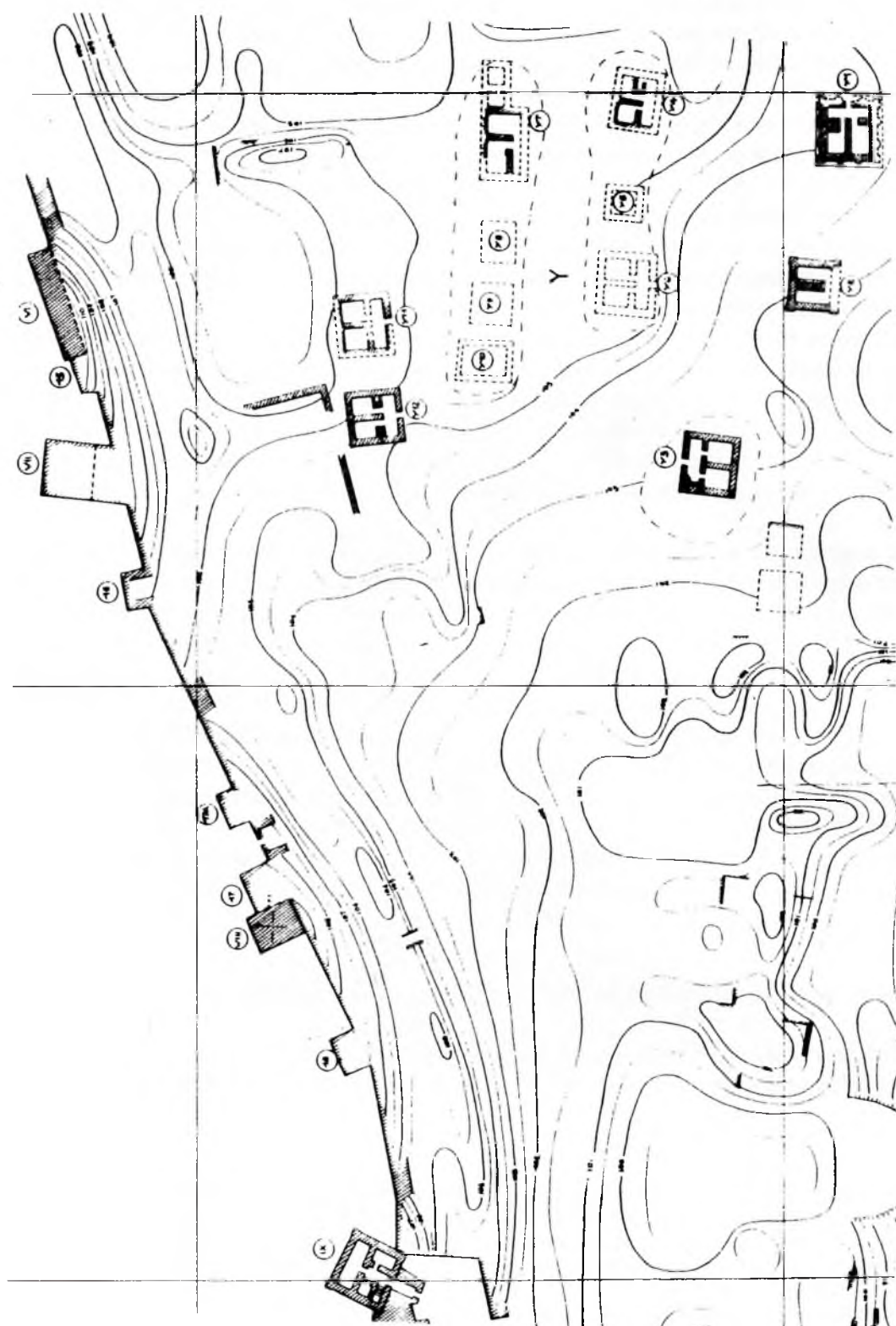


Fig. 2. Hatra. North-eastern part of the city with necropolis Y and fortifications. Scale 1:1000 (courtesy of R. Venco)



Phot. 1. Hatra. Funerary buildings (Aerial photo), (Francesca Dorna Metzger.  
*Funerary Buildings at Hatra*)





Phot. 2. Part of Hatra's fortifications with original towers, a massive tower and tombs  
(Francesca Doma Metzger, *Funerary Buildings at Hatra*)





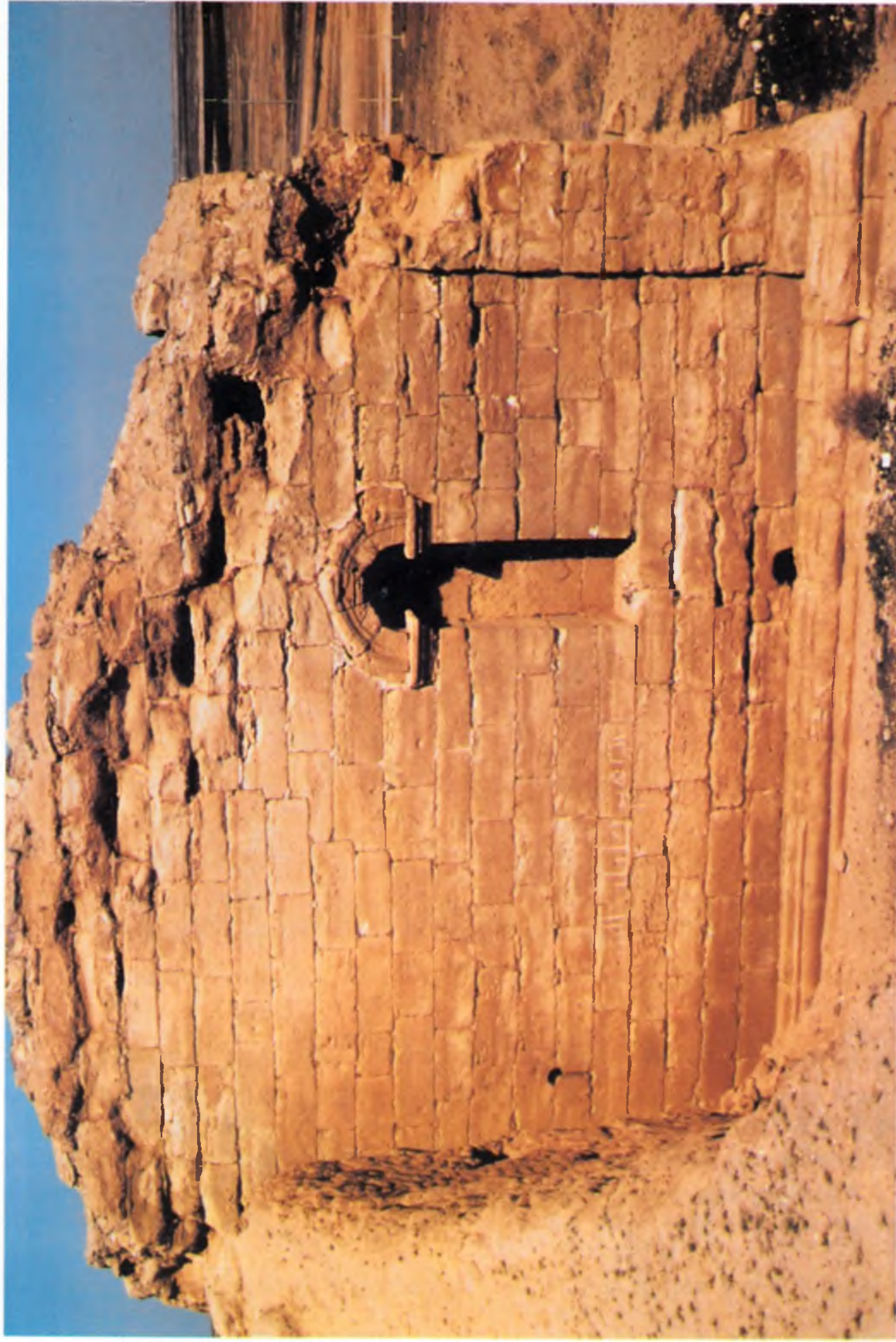
Phot. 3. Hatra. View of the southern room in the ground floor of the tomb U1:  
jutting walls for flat covering (Francesca Dorna Metzger, *Funerary Buildings at Hatra*)





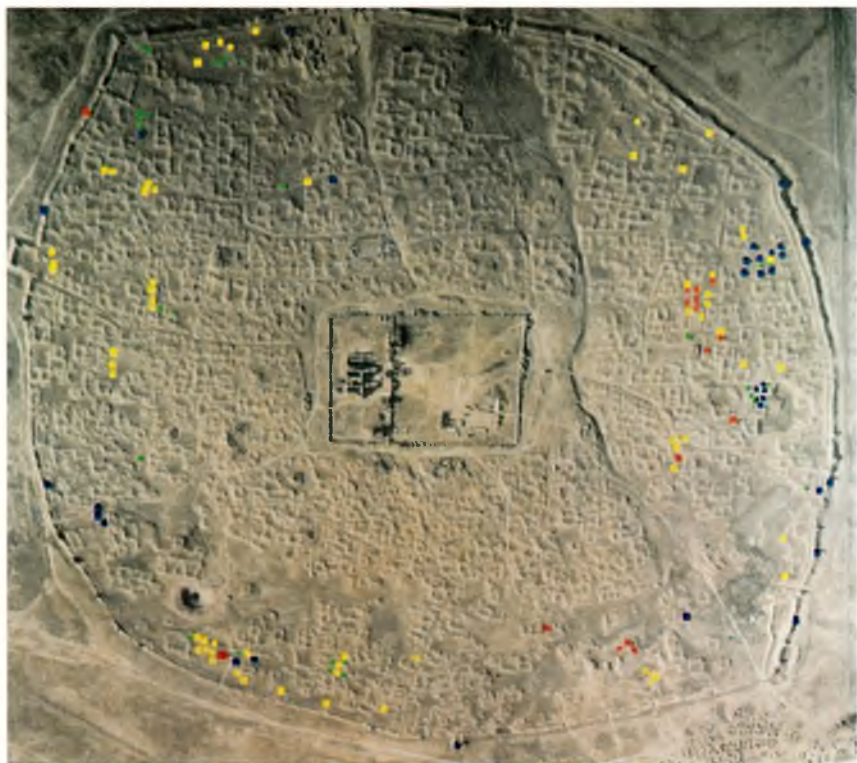
Phot. 4. Hatra. The northern wall of the building Y1, bearing two half columns  
(Francesca Doma Metzger, *Funerary Buildings at Hatra*)





Phot. 5. Hatra. The southern wall of the tomb IX  
(Francesca Dorna Metzger, *Funerary Buildings at Hatra*)





Phot. 6. Hatra. Funeral buildings (blue: first type; red: second type; green: third type; yellow: uncertain (Aerial photo), (Francesca Dorna Metzger, *Funerary Buildings at Hatra*)

addition of an upper floor. Very rarely is there a possible second floor.<sup>10</sup> Different floors are connected either by staircases built into the wall or open trap doors on the corridor ceiling. Doors are completely built in stone, which are often visible in situ. All the tombs are built entirely of limestone. Walls are built in gypsum and rubble lined by cut stones on the two sides. The stone blocks of the wall façade are both finely cut or roughly cut.

Most of the funerary buildings have finely cut blocks for the inner and outer façade.<sup>11</sup> Often the finely square blocks show a mark carved in the center, which possibly identifies the stone cutter or shop. The signs on the stones appear in tombs and in other buildings in stone of the city; it is impossible at the moment to provide a chronological scheme for the construction, but a detailed study is in progress by an Iraqi scholar.<sup>12</sup>

The second type is a smaller number of tombs: constructed of stones blocks roughly cut. In these buildings the inside walls of at least one room jut toward the center of the room, in order to reduce the space covered by flat stone slabs (Phot. 3).<sup>13</sup> This kind of structure never occurs in tombs built in finely cut blocks. Very rarely (in two cases only) are there any funerary buildings with a mixed technique; consisting of the exterior façade walls with finely cut blocks and the interior with roughly cut stones.<sup>14</sup> Interior walls can be recovered by gypsum plaster. Walls of one tomb (Q5) were partly dug in the natural gypsum rock and partly built: this feature is not attested elsewhere at the moment.<sup>15</sup> Rarely do the funerary buildings have an architectural decoration. Moulding stones link the wider base of the tomb and walls; angular pillars decorate the exterior walls. Outer walls are possibly decorated either by two half columns in each side (Phot. 4), or one niche (Phot. 5).

Tombs of different types, are already described by Andrae.<sup>16</sup> A few represent changes after the excavation of some funerary buildings and after the discovery of new tombs. In most of the new identified buildings it is impossible to recognize the type of plan on the ground. The state of preservation reveals only outline of the exterior walls: other details are uncertain. Nevertheless, some observations can be made of the plan and technique. There are different plan types. Rooms can number from two to six, organized in various ways, or with an unique room (Fig. 3). More tomb rooms show a bipartite or tripartite scheme, often further divided. Most of the tombs have a bipartite plan with finely cut masonry, and rooms covered by barrel vaults, sometimes with "pseudovaults" of flat blocks supported by arches. The bipartite plan can be very simple, with two parallel rooms,<sup>17</sup> but more commonly with three rooms: a large entrance and two small symmetrical rooms. This plan is used mainly in the

<sup>10</sup> Andrae (1912: 77, 78, 93, Fig. 92, 96, 131) proposed second floor for the tombs J1 and Y4; it is possible that Y2 should be added to them.

<sup>11</sup> Occasionally there are finely cut blocks to the outside and irregular shape blocks in the inside façade.

<sup>12</sup> H. Bashir, forthcoming. Some symbols appear in buildings chronologically separated, such as a kind of swastika that appears in the walls of the very late Allat temple, and in tomb J3 of the beginning of the second century A.D.

<sup>13</sup> The only exception is building N (Andrae 1912: 16–17, Fig. 18) that has roughly cut blocks and regular walls.

<sup>14</sup> Tombs P4 and G2.

<sup>15</sup> This feature is not in Andrae's publication (Andrae 1912: 87); where the plan of the tomb is so irregular it fails to correspond to the actual remains.

<sup>16</sup> Andrae 1912: 104–106.

<sup>17</sup> The type appears at the ground floor in tombs: Y2, Q10, Z31, 40B, X114, probably Y10, R7, W12, U8, U9, U14, Y10, R7, W12, U18, XXVI, and in the upper floor in: J3, Y2, U1, and probably U3, XXXVII.



ground floors,<sup>18</sup> and it is common also in Assur.<sup>19</sup> Another type of the bipartite scheme has four rooms: half occupied by three small rooms of which the central one is the entrance room, and the other half of the building only consisting of big one room. This type is also used in ground floors, and its function is to support a second floor.<sup>20</sup>

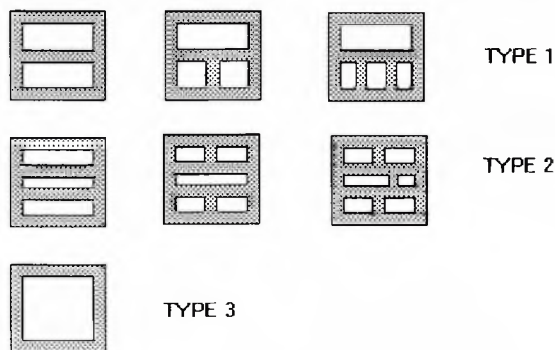


Fig. 3. Typology of the tombs in Hatra

The tombs with tripartite plan are larger than the bipartite ones; more frequently they have two floor levels. This type has masonry with roughly cut stone blocks and jutting interior walls; at least one room has a flat covering, or, "pseudodome". The tripartite plan also can have three parallel rooms, with the central one of smaller dimensions like the entrance corridor.<sup>21</sup> More common is the five rooms plan with a narrow corridor in the center and two symmetrical rooms on each side. The same type occurs in Assur,<sup>22</sup> but the construction technique is different. The subdivision of the inside space into six rooms is a variation of the five room plan: the central corridor has a small room at the end and two rooms on each side.<sup>23</sup>

Buildings with only one room are the most common in the city; their exterior size, (between 6 and 8 m.), is smaller than the tombs with bipartite and tripartite plan.<sup>24</sup> This characteristic type of plan probably is typical of many badly preserved tombs.

The funerary function for all these buildings is not certain even after the excavation of the J necropolis, where two of these buildings (J2 and J7) were without human remains.<sup>25</sup> The presence of niches set on the inside walls were probable for statues of people buried in the nearby tombs. Nevertheless in the same necropolis two buildings (J6 and J4b) are surely

<sup>18</sup> Ground floor in: J4, J5, J10, J11, Q7, Y1, Y3, Y6, Y11, Y12, X1 U2., X115, II, XXVIII, O, probably in T1, S1, W11, U6, LS2, LS4, LS7, LS8, N3, I20; and to the upper floor in Q4, Y3, Y4, probably in J8.

<sup>19</sup> Andrae/Lenzen 1933: 98–99, Taf. 51.

<sup>20</sup> The four room type appears in the ground floor in: J3, U1, U3, IX, XI, N, probably in W11, U6, LS2, N3. It never appears in the upper floor.

<sup>21</sup> Ground floor in: P3, Q14, R2, R3, probably in J1, Q8, XXVII; and upper floor in: J1, probably in J9, R3.

<sup>22</sup> Tomb IV (Andrae/Lenzen 1933: 98–99).

<sup>23</sup> Tomb G2 (Andrae 1912: 76–77, Fig. 93).

<sup>24</sup> The one room type appears in: J4b, J6, J7, P5, Q6, Q9, Q12, Y5, Y8, Y9, Y13, X2, W3, W4, W5, W7, U4, U10, U11, U12, U13, II, LS5, LN10, LN11, LN12, LN14, N1, N6, M3, M4, M6, M9, M10, M11, M12 and probably in G4, G5, Q13, Y14, T2, R8, W1, V2, LS6.

<sup>25</sup> al Salihi 1972: 17–19.

tombs, as two burial pits with skeletons were found inside.<sup>26</sup> The location of the three different types of buildings are not accidental (Phot. 6) – the necropolis and small groups of tombs present a general uniformity of construction. The two types with more than one room are never mixed together, (apart from the unique case of the tomb U1, which is the only with the first plan type and covering technique of the second type), but they mix with the construction a unique room (green). The third type occurs isolated, while only the first two types are included in the fortifications.

## Human remains and findings

The knowledge of burial customs at Hatra is scanty in spite of the eight excavated tombs of the J necropolis and tombs IX, II and O: most of the tombs were plundered and we never know how many people were buried or the kind of funerary goods. The bodies are set generally within wood, ceramic or stone coffins; in two cases (J5 and J6) there were burial jars. The coffins were put in *loculi* within the rooms either dug in the thickness of the walls, the floor, or built with stone slabs and mortar and fixed to the room walls. Bone remains reveal both: burial and cremation. The latter is, as far as we know, very rare, it occurs in two tombs (J5 and J11), together with burials, but this use was probably more common as we can infer from inscription 293 discovered in tomb J3.<sup>27</sup>

The epigraphical remains<sup>28</sup> suggest these tombs are collective burials; the tombs could be build by one or more tribes, like J3, or they could belong to a precise family, like II or X1.<sup>29</sup> The presence in the same building of burial and cremation can be explained by comparing Hatra with Palmyra, where some tombs were sold by a family to foreign people.<sup>30</sup>

## Chronology and conclusions

The chronological evidence for the tombs is very scanty. Most of the information is based on epigraphical data: in tomb J3, there is an inscription from the entrance room, dating the construction of the building to the year 108 A.D. or 111 A.D., according to other scholars.<sup>31</sup>

The tombs included in the city wall have as *terminus ante quem* the construction of the fortifications, whose N and E city gates are dated by inscriptions before 151 A.D. Two tombs included in the inside wall of the main fortifications (X1 and Z4) must have a *terminus ante quem*, related to the construction of the wall, which Professor Gawlikowski dates to the time Septimius Severus' siege.<sup>32</sup> Another *terminus ante quem*, is the construction of the enclosure

<sup>26</sup> Tombs J4b and J6 (al Salihi 1972: 19–20).

<sup>27</sup> al Salihi 1972: 17–20; for the coffins material and the presence of *loculi* in the thickness of the walls, see IX tomb (al Salihi 1990: 190) and in Z4 (Andrae 1912: 99).

<sup>28</sup> Discovered in tomb J3 and from a block isolated belonging to one of the tombs nearby the eastern gate of the city (II? X1?).

<sup>29</sup> al Salihi 1985–86: 109–10.

<sup>30</sup> Gawlikowski 1970: 184–219; Sartre 1989: 425.

<sup>31</sup> B. Aggoula (1975–76: 473) points out the 111 A.D., while the date given by J. Ibrahim (1986: 133) is 108 A.D.

<sup>32</sup> The construction of the inside wall seems to be the work of restoration of the fortifications, after the siege of Septimius Severus (Gawlikowski 1994).

wall of Shrine XIII in 234/235 A.D., that englobe P4. This date is close to the fall of the city is in 241 A.D. and not so important.<sup>33</sup> An incomplete inscription discovered near the eastern gate from one of the tombs to the north has a date possibly of 55 A.D.<sup>34</sup>

For the other tombs, we have no chronological evidence. The coins found in the Iraqi excavations of the J necropolis belong to very different periods, including the Abbasid period, which points to a later visit of the site.<sup>35</sup> The most interesting data is the *terminus ante quem* 151 A.D. for the many tombs included in the main city wall: this *terminus* concerns two types of buildings, namely those with more than one room (first and second type). Tomb J3 is dated to the year 108 or 111 A.D., i.e. before 151 A.D. There are no indications for a chronology of the third type of tomb – with one room – which is very common in all the areas of the city but not included in the fortifications. No archaeological evidence connects the dated J3 tomb with the other tombs of the J necropolis, so it is not certain if these tombs are contemporary or not. The general uniformity of tomb technique and plans within the same necropolis, is insufficient for any hypothesis of a relative chronology.

Some general conclusions can now be set forth:

- 1) The tombs included in the fortifications can not be connected with the necropolis.
- 2) As with J3, there may be other tombs within the inhabited area – and necropolis – which are contemporary to those included in the city wall.
- 3) The tombs were originally located some distance from the ancient town.
- 4) The necropolis are relatively regular in burial orientation and the topographical position of the buildings.

It is possible that originally there were scattered tombs outside the defined area, and later after the construction of the main city wall, other tombs were built, forming a regular necropolis. As for the relation between the different types of funerary buildings it is not clear if the typological difference between them is due to social (wealth or affiliation to a particular ethnic group) or chronological factors. If the chronological factor is the reason for the difference of the tombs of Hatra; it is possible the absence of unique room buildings (third type) included in the city walls and their presence in the urban area, especially in the necropolis, is contemporary and that this type of tomb is later in comparison to the others. From the relation between the two other types of tombs with more rooms, or both probably after 151 A.D., several matters seem clear about the tombs:

- 1) the majority are of bipartited constructions,
- 2) there is only one necropolis with tripartite plan tombs,
- 3) the latter (tripartite) type of building is often located in areas closer to the ancient city, while the other necropolis is located near the fortifications. It is therefore possible are contemporary and of earlier date the buildings of the second type with tripartite plan and roughly cut stones. Is to be remembered that this building technique does not occur in other buildings of the city, as far as we know. This construction was later replaced by more functional plans, the first and third types, with smaller dimensions and with a technique in common with other buildings of the city.

<sup>33</sup> al Salihi 1990: 30–34.

<sup>34</sup> Gawlikowski 1994: 184, appendix II.

<sup>35</sup> The coins found (al Salihi 1972: 18–20, Fig. 23) belong to Philip Philadelphos (92–83 B.C.), Osroes (89/90–127 A.D.) and some are Abbasid.

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